DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 604 UD 033 207

AUTHOR	Thornberry, Terence P.; Smith, Carolyn A.; Rivera, Craig; Huizinga, David; Stouthamer-Loeber, Magda
TITLE	Family Disruption and Delinquency. Juvenile Justice Bulletin.
INSTITUTION	Department of Justice, Washington, DC. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
REPORT NO	NCJ-178285
PUB DATE	1999-09-00
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescents; *Delinquency; Disadvantaged Youth; *Family Environment; Family Structure; *Prevention; *Risk; *Urban Youth

ABSTRACT

At study sites in Rochester (New York), Denver (Colorado) and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), three research teams studying the impact of family disruption on juvenile delinquency have interviewed approximately 4,000 participants at regular intervals for a decade, recording their lives in detail. Findings to date indicate that preventing delinquency requires accurate identification of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior and the protective factors that enhance positive adolescent development. Overall, data indicate a consistent relationship between a greater number of family transitions and a higher level of delinquency and drug use. The magnitude of differences between youth with no family transitions and those with many transitions was similar across the three cities, and the relationships were statistically significant in Rochester and Denver. These findings have implications for the prevention and treatment of delinquency and drug use. (Contains 6 figures and 15 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 436 604

OJDP
Shay Bilchik, Administrator
September 1999
JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Family Disruption and Delinquency

Terence P. Thornberry, Carolyn A. Smith, Craig Rivera, David Huizinga, and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber

This Bulletin is part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Youth Development Series, which presents findings from the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. Teams at the University at Albany, State University of New York; the University of Colorado; and the University of Pittsburgh collaborated extensively in designing the studies. At study sites in Rochester, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the three research teams have interviewed 4,000 participants at regular intervals for a decade, recording their lives in detail. Findings to date indicate that preventing delinquency requires accurate identification of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior and the protective factors that enhance positive adolescent development.

The composition of families is one aspect of family life that is consistently associated with delinquency. Children who live in homes with only one parent or in which marital relationships have been disrupted by divorce or separation are more likely to display a range of emotional and behavioral problems, including delinquency, than children from two-parent families (Wells and Rankin, 1991).

Since 1970, the proportion of American households that have children who live with both parents has declined substantially. In 1970, 64 percent of African American children lived with two parents, compared with 35 percent in 1997; comparable figures for white children are 90 percent and 74 percent, respectively (Lugaila, 1998). According to some estimates, as many as 40 percent of white children and 75 percent of African American children will experience parental separation or divorce before they reach age 16 (Bray and Hetherington, 1993) and many of these children will experience multiple family disruptions over time (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991).

As alarming as these figures are, they do not address the impact of family transitions on individual children. These transitions can set into motion changes in residence, financial conditions, family roles, and relationships along with increased stress and conflict in the home. All of these factors have major implications for children's adjustment (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Shaw, Emery, and Tuer, 1993). While some studies have found that the number of family transitions is linked to delinquency (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Fergusson, Horwood, and Linsky, 1992), there is little information on the impact of multiple family transitions on serious adolescent problem behavior such as delinquency and drug use.

From the Administrator

Despite a multitude of happy exceptions, it is a sad truth that children in families disrupted by divorce or separation have a greater chance of exhibiting problem behavior, including delinquency, than children being raised by two parents. This Bulletin examines the impact that multiple changes in family structure have on an adolescent's risk of serious problem behavior.

Research teams in 3 cities interviewed 4,000 youth and their caretakers to analyze the prevalence of delinquent behaviors and drug use and the number of family transitions the youth had experienced. The researchers found that these young people had faced a substantial number of family transitions, which can result in decreased financial security and increased stress and conflict. In Rochester, NY, and Denver, CO, the number of transitions had a significant effect on delinquency and drug use, with the Pittsburgh, PA, data showing the same trend, although not at a statistically significant level.

The findings reported here add to our knowledge about families and children at risk and give us a broader understanding of delinquency and its causes. Society cannot guarantee an intact, stable family for every child, but we can—and must—make every effort to counteract the negative effects of family disruption.

Shay Bilchik
Administrator

UIXB3207

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

especially in representative samples that include at-risk youth who experience both problem behaviors and family transitions. The central question of this analysis is: Are adolescents who experience multiple changes in family structure more likely to be involved in delinquency and drug use than adolescents who live in more stable families?

Methods

To address this issue, data were drawn from the three longitudinal projects of OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency: the Rochester Youth Development Study, the Denver Youth Survey, and the Pittsburgh Youth Study. All three projects used prospective longitudinal designs that followed the same individuals from childhood or early adolescence through early adulthood. Overall, the three projects selected probability samples totaling 4,000 urban youth. At each site, the youth and a primary caretaker were interviewed separately in private settings at established intervals. The specific designs of the projects have been reported in other OJJDP publications, especially Browning et al. (1999).

In these studies, delinquency was measured by self-reports of involvement in a variety of delinquent behaviors ranging from petty theft to aggravated assault; youth also indicated their use of illegal drugs ranging from marijuana to heroin. In the analysis that follows, the responses for self-reported delinquency and drug use were cumulated over a 4-year period covering middle adolescence.

For the Rochester project, family transitions were counted by comparing family structure in adjacent interviews with boys and girls between the ages of 13 and 17 (up to a maximum of eight transitions using 6-month interviews). For example, if a youth lived with both biological parents during the first interview and with the biological mother only at the second interview, a transition occurred. If the mother's partner subsequently moved into the household, a second transition occurred. A similar strategy was used in the Denver project for boys and girls ages 14 to 18 for the sample members who were born in 1974 (up to a maximum of four transitions using annual interviews). In the Pittsburgh project, which included only boys, retrospective reports of the number of changes in caretaker status occurring between the ages of 11 and 15

Figure 1: Number of Family Transitions—Rochester

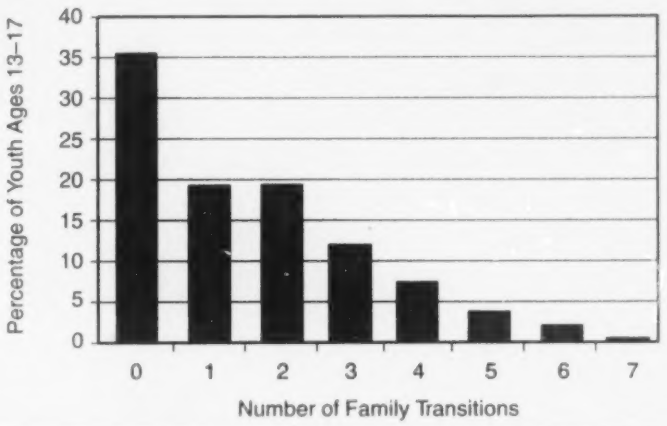


Figure 2: Number of Family Transitions—Denver

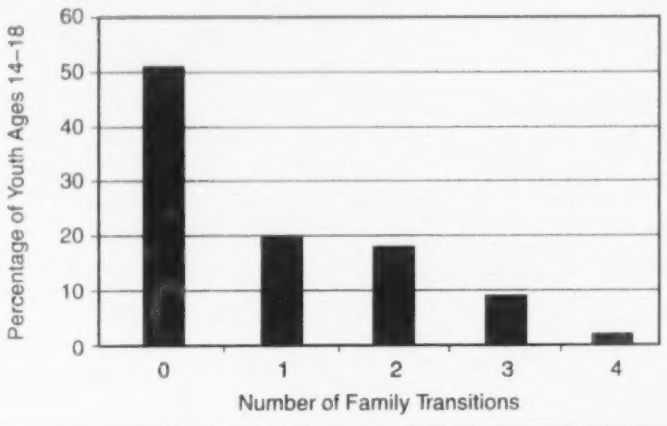
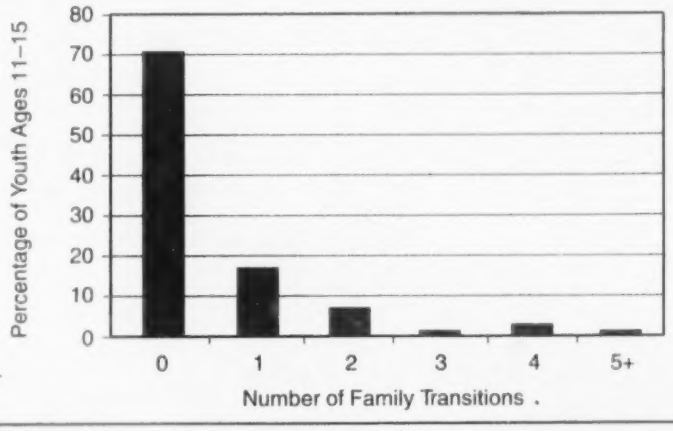


Figure 3: Number of Family Transitions—Pittsburgh



were obtained from the parent respondents for the seventh-grade cohort (no predetermined maximum number of transitions). The maximum possible number of transitions varied across the three sites because of these differences in design and measurement strategies.

Results

The youth in these urban samples experienced a substantial number of family transitions during adolescence. In Rochester, about two-thirds of the sample (64.5 percent) experienced at least one change in family structure over the 4-year period and about 45 percent experienced two or more transitions (see figure 1). Almost half of the Denver youth (49 percent) had one or more family changes and 29 percent had two or more (see figure 2). Family instability is less pronounced in Pittsburgh; about 30 percent of the boys experienced one or more family transitions (see figure 3).

The number of family transitions had a clear and statistically significant effect on the prevalence of delinquency and drug use for the Rochester youth (see figure 4). About two-thirds (64.1 percent) of those who experienced no changes in family structure reported delinquency; this rate increased steadily as the number of transitions increased, reaching a peak of 90 percent for youth who experienced five or more transitions. A stronger pattern was seen for drug use—about 28 percent of adolescents with no change in family structure reported using drugs, but that rate increased to almost 60 percent for those who experienced five or more transitions.

In Denver (see figure 5), the prevalence of delinquency increased significantly with an increase in family transitions, from 61 percent for youth with no transitions to a peak of 85 percent for youth with three or more transitions. About one-third (31 percent) of adolescents with no family transitions used drugs, and 58 percent of those with three or more transitions used drugs.

In Pittsburgh (see figure 6), the relationships between family transitions and both delinquency and drug use were not statistically significant, but the trend is the same as that observed in Denver and Rochester. While 64 percent of juveniles who experienced no transitions reported delinquency, 80 percent of those who experienced three or more transitions

Figure 4: Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use by Number of Family Transitions—Rochester

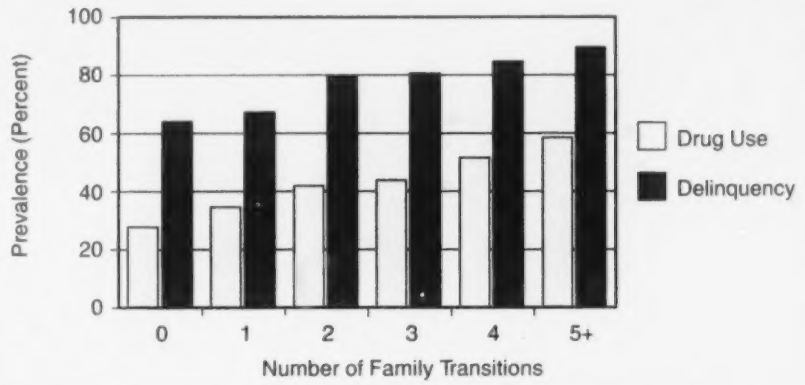


Figure 5: Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use by Number of Family Transitions—Denver

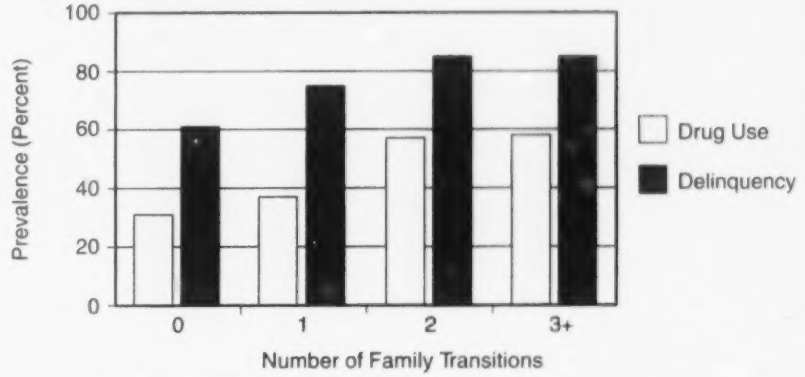
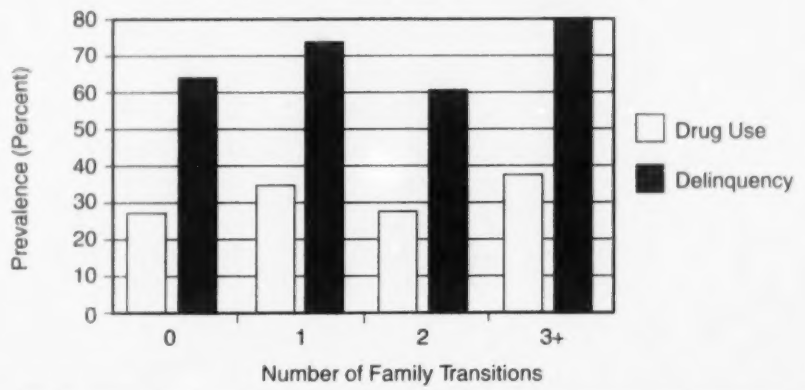


Figure 6: Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use by Number of Family Transitions—Pittsburgh



reported delinquency. About 27 percent of youth with no family transitions reported drug use, and more than one-third (37.5 percent) of those with three or more transitions used drugs.

A more refined analysis (results not shown) using the Rochester data (Smith, Rivera, and Thornberry, 1997) examined these issues in greater depth to ensure that the basic results reported in this Bulletin from data that compare only two variables—family transitions and delinquent behavior—are still accurate when other factors are taken into account. First, in addition to measuring the prevalence of delinquency and drug use (the data reported in figure 4), the frequency of involvement in delinquency and drug use was examined. Second, the number of family transitions that occurred near the beginning of the study was compared with delinquency and drug use later in the study. This ensures that the predictor variable—experiencing family transitions—actually occurs before the outcome variable—delinquency or drug use. Finally, the effects of gender, family poverty, family structure at the beginning of the study, parental supervision, and earlier delinquency or drug use were controlled when the relationships between family transitions and delinquency and drug use were reexamined. This helps ensure that the relationships reported earlier (see figure 4) were not due to these other variables. (See Smith, Rivera, and Thornberry, 1997, for these results.) In all of these comparisons, the results were the same as those reported here: a greater number of family transitions was significantly related to a higher rate of delinquency and drug use.

Summary and Conclusions

In urban samples with poor and ethnically diverse youth, many family transitions were evident throughout adolescence. In addition, many other youth experienced family transitions at earlier ages. Using the Pittsburgh data, Stouthamer-Loeber (1993) showed that 67 percent of the sample had experienced at least one family transition between birth and age 15—a high level of family disruption.

Overall, the data reported here indicate a consistent relationship between a greater number of family transitions and a higher level of delinquency and drug use. The magnitude of the differences between youth with no family transitions and those with many family transitions was similar across the three cities, and the relationships were statistically significant in Rochester and Denver. These results suggest that multiple family transitions are a risk factor for delinquency.

These findings have implications for the prevention and treatment of delinquency and drug use. As indicated, family transitions may have a number of consequences for adolescent adjustment. For example, adolescents who experience ongoing stress may have difficulty managing anger and other negative emotions, and this may contribute to their involvement with delinquency or drugs. Little is known about the relationships among these factors, but this suggests the need for further research on assessment, screening, and treatment needs in this population of youth.

On a societal level, there is evidence that economic hardship and lack of access to opportunity and resources undermine marital and parental functioning and that poverty has had a particularly adverse impact on the initiation and stability of marriages among families of color (McLoyd, 1990; Wilson, 1987). The welfare system may also discourage marriage because of concerns about benefits (Moffitt, 1995).

A range of outcomes is possible for adolescents who experience family transitions. Additional information is needed on children who thrive despite several changes in family circumstances; it is important to focus on the potential for resilience among these children. It is evident that some family separations reduce conflict and stress. For example, overt marital conflict may be greatly distressing to children; the stress may be reduced when the partners separate from one another. In addition, some members of the extended family (such as a concerned stepparent or grandparent) who become more involved in an adolescent's life can provide additional nurturing or other resources, such as financial help, that offset the impact of the transition. Research on the aftermath of conflict and divorce suggests a number of protective factors, including academic and social competence and structured school environments, that can promote resilience in adolescents who experience family transitions (Hetherington, 1993). Further research will illuminate other areas for policy and intervention.

References

Bray, J.H., and Hetherington, E.M. 1993. Families in transition: Introduction and overview. *Journal of Family Psychology* 7(1):3–8.

Browning, K., Huizinga, D., Loeber, R., and Thornberry, T.P. 1999. *Causes and Correlates of Delinquency Program*. Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Bumpass, L., and Sweet, J.A. 1989. Children's experience in single-parent families: Implications of cohabitation and marital transitions. *Family Planning Perspectives* 21(6):256–260.

Capaldi, D., and Patterson, D.M. 1991. Relation of parental transition to boys' adjustment problems: I. A linear hypothesis, II. Mothers at risk for transitions and unskilled parenting. *Developmental Psychology* 27(3):489–504.

Fergusson, D.M., Horwood, L.J., and Linsky, M.T. 1992. Family change, parental discord and early offending. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 33(6):1059–1075.

Furstenberg, F.F., Jr., and Cherlin, A.J. 1991. *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hetherington, E.M. 1993. An overview of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage with a focus on early adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology* 7(1):39–56.

Lugaila, T. 1998. *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1998 (Update)*. U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Report P20–514. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

McLoyd, V. 1990. The impact of economic hardship on black families and children: Psychological distress, parenting, and socioemotional development. *Child Development* 61(2):311–346.

Moffitt, R.A. 1995. The effect of the welfare system on nonmarital childbearing. In *Report to Congress on Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing*. Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, pp. 167–176.

Shaw, D.S., Emery, R.E., and Tuer, M.D. 1993. Parental functioning and children's adjustment in families of divorce: A prospective study. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 21(1):119–135.

Smith, C.A., Rivera, C., and Thornberry, T.P. 1997. Family disruption and delinquency: The impact of changes in family structure on adolescent development. Unpublished report prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Stouthamer-Loeber, M. 1993. Boys' History of Caretakers. Unpublished report #3 of the Pittsburgh Youth Study. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh.

Wells, L.E., and Rankin, J.H. 1991. Families and delinquency: A meta-analysis of the impact of broken homes. *Social Problems* 38(1):71–83.

Wilson, W.J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Acknowledgments

Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D., is Professor and former Dean at the School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, Albany, NY, and Director of the Rochester Youth Development Study. Carolyn A. Smith, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at the School of Social Welfare, University at Albany, and a Coprincipal Investigator of the Rochester Youth Development Study. Craig Rivera is a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, and a research assistant for the Rochester Youth Development Study. David Huizinga, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, Boulder, and Director of the Denver Youth Survey. Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, Ph.D., is Codirector of the Life History Studies Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, University of Pittsburgh Medical School, and Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

Research for the Rochester Youth Development Study, the Pittsburgh Youth Study, and the Denver Youth Survey is supported by OJJDP under grants 96–MU–FX–0014, 96–MU–FX–0012, and 96–MU–FX–0017, respectively. The Rochester Youth Development Study is also supported by grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Science Foundation. The Pittsburgh Youth Study is also supported by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health. The Denver Youth Survey is also supported by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Share With Your Colleagues

Unless otherwise noted, OJJDP publications are not copyright protected. We encourage you to reproduce this document, share it with your colleagues, and reprint it in your newsletter or journal. However, if you reprint, please cite OJJDP and the authors of this Bulletin. We are also interested in your feedback, such as how you received a copy, how you intend to use the information, and how OJJDP materials meet your individual or agency needs. Please direct your comments and questions to:

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse
Publication Reprint/Feedback
P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849–6000
800–638–8736
301–519–5212 (fax)
E-Mail: askncjrs@ncjrs.org

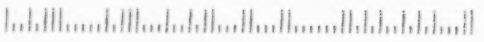
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Washington, DC 20531

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use $300

PRESORTED STANDARD
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
DOJ/OJJDP
PERMIT NO. G–91



AUTO********3-DGS 202 S20 P1
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 76821
DIRECTOR
EDUC RESOURCES INFO CTR (ERIC)
CAPITOL PLACE
555 NEW JERSEY AVE NW RM 202A
WASHINGTON DC 20208-0001